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# A SYSTEM OF PUNCTUATION.

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# SYSTEM OF PUNCTUATION

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“DE MINIMIS”

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## NOTE.

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THE following pages contain substantially the notes of a lecture delivered to several classes in the University. They are printed, both in order to save time in giving my own instruction, and in the hope that this method of presenting the subject may recommend itself to others.

I have tried different plans of initiating students of composition into the mystery of Punctuation. The least successful has been that which rested on usage: the most successful, the one presented here. Even a compromise, which stated the general principles now contended for, and then sent the student to our literature for models, was less productive of results than this effort to deduce a few rules from the fundamental truths of the subject.

I have aimed at the utmost brevity consistent with

clearness and success in teaching. The teacher can extend the discussion or multiply the examples, as the wants of his class may require.

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA,

April 15, 1878.

## A SYSTEM OF PUNCTUATION.

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### I.

PUNCTUATION is the art of marking distinctly for the eye either the construction of the sentence or the kind of sentence with which it is used. To a certain extent, this work depends upon usage; but, on another side, it is ultimately controlled by principles of construction or thought, and depends upon usage only so far as usage truly represents these laws of thought and construction. For example, the forms and meanings of the signs employed are matters of *convention*, or agreement, and have been adopted with but little regard to their reasonableness or their unreasonableness. But the art of using these stops correctly implies a knowledge of the nature and construction of the sentence and the paragraph, as well as of the character of the thought expressed. It ultimately depends, therefore, upon Grammar, the science of the sentence, and Logic, the science of thought. The practice of punctuation can rest upon usage, only when usage is settled; that is, when it has

so completely justified itself at the bar of Good Sense, that all intelligent and cultivated people are agreed upon obeying its dictates. This, it is generally conceded, (though the concession is sometimes forgotten,) is the true meaning of Horace's oft-quoted dictum, *Usus est et jus et norma loquendi*:<sup>1</sup> this must be what we mean when we say that usage controls our syntax or our vocabulary or any other department of Style.<sup>2</sup>

But it will hardly be claimed that usage in punctuation is settled. The popular verdict is that the whole matter is a question of taste, and that it is enough to say, in reply to any argument on the merits of a given case, "I *like* the such-a-point in that place." Occasionally we are told that, since punctuation depends upon construction, he who writes clearly will punctuate clearly, —a doctrine far preferable to the other, though scarcely the whole truth, after all; but it is oftener held that ease and grace in writing are incompatible with a too careful use of the points, and that a judicious carelessness is as becoming as an intentional dishabille. Indeed, it is even hinted darkly that some over-particular persons, in their search for the form of discourse, have actually lost sight of its essence, and so have produced compositions "all body and no soul." Accordingly, general practice grows decidedly careless; commas

<sup>1</sup> *Usage is the law and rule of speech.*

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix, I.

and dashes—the latter in tropical profusion—usurp the offices of all the other stops; the semi-colon remains but a distant acquaintance; and the colon is all but unknown.<sup>1</sup> Editors complain that MSS. and even letters reach them, that are unfitted for publication by their actual slovenliness in this respect; and teachers confess that many an otherwise clever composition would serve as a capital exercise in False Punctuation. Even the best-printed editions of our standard authors betray irregularities that stand in strange contrast with their general conformity to the laws of Rhetoric and Grammar. Not only do the several writers punctuate differently, but each single writer uses different stops for the same purpose and the same stop in different offices.<sup>2</sup>

## II.

It follows, therefore, that a system of punctuation based wholly upon usage—commonly called an *empirical*, or *a posteriori*, system—cannot, in the present state of the art, be entirely successful. Scientific generalization, (*i. e.*, the inferring of a

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix, II.

<sup>2</sup> Proof of this assertion may readily be found in our literature: it is omitted here only for want of space,—a few examples of such irregularities being of little value as evidence, and a large number properly displayed covering a great many pages.

rule from a number of characteristic cases,) is clearly impossible from examples that flatly contradict each other. "If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?" Such systems serve only to bring into bolder relief the variations that are already too evident upon the face of the literature. Moreover, they lack that logical unity which so materially assists the mind in remembering and applying the rules; and must consist of so many and so minute directions, with exceptions more numerous even than the rules, that one is bewildered by this multiplying of commandments. Yet, if it is worth while to punctuate at all,—if the marks of punctuation, "trifles" though they be, are in any respect worthy of our attention,—it is surely desirable to have a simple, clear and compact body of rules.<sup>1</sup> This we must seek by a method quite different from that which is pursued by the empirical systems.

We turn, then, to the opposite method of development, the *a priori*, or that which proceeds from the necessary conditions of the subject. These conditions are simple enough to be grasped by any mind properly trained in elementary Grammar, and lead to a few clear rules, which justify themselves by demonstrating their own reasonableness, while they are bound together by a logical sequence that secures for them essential unity. Moreover,

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix, III.

the rules are so broad, so entirely statements of general truths rather than arbitrary enactments, that they leave a writer all the liberty he can possibly desire or claim for his punctuation as a part of the communication of his own thought. [See Sec. VI., below.] Besides, it is confidently believed that, by this system, the whole subject is brought within easy grasp, and that a greater degree of consistency and uniformity will be promoted than is possible by any other plan.

### III.

The following propositions may stand as postulates:—

1. The end in view in punctuation is to mark distinctly for the eye (*not for the ear*) either (A) the construction of the sentence or (B) the kind of sentence with which it is used.
2. Only so many marks will be needed as are required to distinguish the several kinds of sentences from each other and to separate the several parts of sentences.

3. Absolute consistency and uniformity are impossible: variations must occur, so long as men differ in judgment or in taste; and, provided they do not affect the clearness of the sentence, are not to be regretted.

Let us see whither these propositions will lead us.

#### IV.

1. From the principle that punctuation is addressed to the eye, not to the ear, comes

**RULE I.**—Punctuate for meaning, not for elocution. *I. e.*, use only so many stops as are absolutely necessary to show the relations of the several sentences or members of sentences. More or fewer always create ambiguity, and may lead to a misunderstanding of the writer. *E. g.*,

(1) But, at any rate, it is a town on a hill, wooded with two-and-thirty bushes, of very uniform size, and possessing about the same number of leaves each.

(2) Purple, and crimson, and scarlet, like the curtains of God's tabernacle, the rejoicing trees sank into the valley in showers of light, every separate leaf quivering with buoyant and burning life; each, as it turned to reflect or to transmit the sunbeam, first a torch and then an emerald.

In Ex. (1) the commas after 'hill,' 'bushes,' and 'size' seem to show the agreement of the following clauses with 'town,' and not (as is meant) with 'hill' or 'bushes.' In Ex. (2) not a single point could be omitted, perhaps, without endangering the sense.

2. Sentences are commonly divided by grammarians in two ways:—

(A.) With regard to their construction, into

(a) SIMPLE, (b) COMPLEX, (c) COMPOUND.

(B.) With regard to the kind of thought expressed, into

(a) DECLARATIVE, including IMPERATIVE, (b) INTERROGATIVE, (c) EXCLAMATORY, (d) INTERJECTED, (e) BROKEN, (f) QUOTED.

Upon the definitions of the simple and the compound sentence, all writers are agreed, as they are, also, in conceding that the elements of a sentence (its *subject*, *predicate* and *copula*,) may be either simple or modified or compound, without changing the character of the sentence; but upon the question what is meant by a complex sentence, they are divided. The sentence usually so named, (b') a principal and a dependent clause,—*e. g.*, Tittinius, if thou lov'st me, mount thou my horse,—is treated by some grammarians as a modified simple sentence; while the term 'complex' is restricted to (b'') a simple or a compound sentence

“combined with elements that are foreign to it;” *e. g.*, “I have tried Prince George sober,” said Charles the Second; “and I have tried him drunk; and, drunk or sober, there is nothing in him.” For our purposes, luckily, this question need not be settled, the principles of punctuation that apply to either (*a*) or (*b*) controlling (*b'*) equally well.

3. Beginning with class (B.), we see at once that each of the six kinds of sentences is indicated by its own peculiar mark standing at the end of the sentence or enclosing it.

Hence, (*a*) the period, (*b*) the note of interroga-  
tion, or question-mark, (*c*) the note of exclamation,  
(*d*) the parenthesis or brackets or dashes, (*e*) the  
single dash, and (*f*) the marks of quotation.

Points (*d*), (*e*) and (*f*) are used also with clauses,  
phrases, and even single words; and may, there-  
fore, be joined with other points to show the con-  
struction of the words enclosed, or even with (*a*),  
(*b*) or (*c*) to mark the kind of sentence. *E. g.*,

(1) What! know you not - you ought not walk  
without the sign of your profession?—Speak, what trade art  
thou?

(2) Coriolanus. [Drawing his sword.]

(3) If we were to read as Malone would have us,—“Making  
*not* reservation of yourselves,—it would imply

NOTE.—The period has, besides, some conventional uses, as in abbreviations, etc. [See RULE IX.,

Note.] Commas are occasionally substituted for the parenthesis; but this seems hardly in keeping, unless the words interjected form only a modifying clause. The change appears to have been suggested by the teaching of Rhetoric against long parentheses and too many of them; but the vice of the construction is certainly not cured by removing the sign of its true character and putting in its place one that, in all likelihood, will only increase the obscurity. Besides, the very form of the parenthesis is well suited to indicate the kind of sentence it encloses. The dashes, also, are clear in this respect; and are, therefore, used interchangeably with the parenthesis, except that they cannot mark (1) a sentence independent in construction, and parenthetical to two others that would have to be separated by a period, if they stood together; or (2) a parenthesis of any sort that concludes an independent sentence. *Thus,*

(1) Therefore we are always confident, knowing that whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord. (For we walk by faith, not by sight.) We are confident, I say - - .

(2) Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my helpers in Christ Jesus: (who have for my life laid down their own necks: unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles.)

In the following, however, the dashes, alone or with commas, could readily have been used:—

(3) Know ye not, brethren, (for I speak to them that know the law,) how ?<sup>1</sup>

The brackets are generally reserved to mark such interjected matter as is quite foreign to the thought expressed in the sentence :—

(1) Corrections, comments or additions by a second hand; (2) explanatory signs; and (3) matter so irrelevant that it might have been omitted, or, at least, have been placed in a note. *E.g.*,

(1) The country in the extreme northwest [east ?]

(1) This [Lepidns] is a slight, unmeritable man.

(1) The confidence of the community, [and the place of head,]

(2) The asterisk [\*] is used

(3) Lord Macaulay's works [London : Longmans, Green, and Co. 1871] are

But, upon this point, usage is divided ; and no good reason can, perhaps, be given for the practice described above, except the propriety of uniformity in writing.

In Spanish books the note of interrogation *inverted* [;] is placed *before* a question to give warning to the reader. What a multitude of misreadings

<sup>1</sup> I do not hesitate to quote Scripture for this purpose, because (1) the punctuation of the Bible is no part of the Work as originally written ; and (2) if, by quoting it in this way, I impress any one with the feeling that this marvellous literary product is one that no educated English-speaking man dare be ignorant of, I shall at least prepare the way for that higher appreciation of it as a revelation of infinite importance to every mortal.

and re-readings, would be prevented by the adoption of this sign in English!

From all this we get

**RULE II.**—The close (*a*) of a declarative or an imperative sentence is marked by the period; (*b*) of an interrogative sentence, by the question-mark; and (*c*) of an exclamatory sentence, by the note of exclamation. (*d*) Interjected sentences or parts of sentences must be enclosed within the parenthesis or (except in the cases specified above) the dashes or (if the interjected matter be quite foreign to the main thought,) the brackets. (*e*) Broken sentences take the single dash at the point at which the change of construction (*anaeolusthon*) or the temporary halt (*suspension*) occurs. (*f*) Quotations take quotation-marks before and after them. Further, any other mark of punctuation may stand with the parenthesis, dashes, brackets or quotation-marks, to indicate the construction or the character of the matter enclosed. [See RULES VII.—X., *below*, and clauses (*b*) and (*c*), *above*.]

**NOTE.**—The distinction between “ ” and ‘ ’ is well known; but, recently, some writers have in-

roduced the directly opposite practice, apparently because it would seem reasonable to mark a single quotation by the single signs, and a double quotation by the same signs used twice. Moreover, it is easier to write ' ' than " " ; so that economy would seem to demand a change of usage, unless, indeed, the confusion incident upon such a change at this late day would more than counterbalance the gain.

The following passages illustrate the use of the single dash :—

“ You don’t mean to tell an honest man”—he was recommencing , when his eye became fascinated  
[Anacoluthon.]

He wore it the last time you ever saw him, and the last time you ever will see him—in this world. [Suspension.]

4. Again, our sentences require punctuation to indicate their construction. Recurring to the classification, [2. (A.), *above*,] we may state the following principles.

**RULE III.**—The simple sentence (*a*) needs no punctuation (1); except, *first*, in an element that is modified by a word or words not in the same construction (2), or by a compound modifier the parts of which are not connected by conjunctions (3), except (sometimes) the last two (4); and, *second*, in a compound element the parts of which

are, in like manner, left unconnected (5), (6). Other modified elements (7) and compound elements and modifiers whose parts are connected (8), should properly be left unpunctuated, except when a point is necessary to prevent a misconstruction of the sentence (9). But in cases (4), (6) and (8) common practice varies under the privilege of III. (3).<sup>1</sup> *Thus,*

- (1) The general was conscious.
- (2) Bacon, a more acute and dispassionate observer than the historian of Friedrich, and practically acquainted with the ends and expedients of kings, has left us .
- (3) With all his learning [he was] a vain, warm-hearted, childlike man.
- (4) A dark, monotonous, and melancholy grey tint.
- (4) You perceive old, rusty and dilapidated towers.
- (5) We ourselves are often very credulous, very impatient, very shortsighted, .
- (6) Steevens, Hallam, and Dyce are unreasonably sceptical .
- (6) All that were requisite were joyousness, beauty and adornment.
- (7) A glossary to Hooker would be at least ten times as large as a glossary to an equal amount of writing by Sydney.
- (8) Hence is the inner life of so many suffering women Sunless and silent and deep.

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<sup>1</sup> When the words (or phrases or clauses) connected by 'and' are *distributive* or *disjunctive* in meaning, the stops seem necessary. [See RULE I., Ex. (2).]

(8) All who beheld it rejoiced, and praised the Lord, and took courage.

(8) The babies were out in full force, looking as gay and delicate and sweet as the snow-drops, hyacinths, and daffodils.

(8) Thou neither great at court, nor in the war,  
Nor at the exchange shalt be, nor at the wrangling bar.

(9) At that date he endeavored to gain admission into Parliament as burgess for Midhurst, and was defeated

(9) See Ex. (2), the comma after 'Friedrich.'

NOTE.—Inversions (1) and important ellipses (2) require punctuation in contradiction of this rule. But, on this point, writers make very free use of both their judgment and their taste. *Thus,*

(1) At nine o'clock, she bade him "good night."

(2) *I*, to herd with narrow foreheads!

But,

(1) In the twilight he had a good lounge on the sofa.

(2) *I* the heir of all the ages!

(2) Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man.

RULE IV.—The complex sentence of the form (b') will require punctuation to separate its clauses from each other (1); of the form (b''), to distinguish "foreign elements" from the rest of the sentence. *Thus,*

(1) If your majesty, after all that has happened, has still any hope of safety in arms, we have done.

(2) See Ex. (b'') in paragraph 2, *above*.

Of course, the several clauses of a complex sentence must also be punctuated *as independent sentences*.

**RULE V.**—The compound sentence (*c*) will require double punctuation, (1) to separate its members, and (2) to show the construction of these members as independent sentences. *Thus*,

(1) and (2) Art is long, and Time is fleeting,  
And our hearts, though stout and brave,  
Still, like muffled drums, are beating  
Funeral marches to the grave.

Sentences of the classes (*b*) and (*c*) may become quite intricate, but they can always be readily punctuated by the process here indicated, *viz.*,

**RULE VI.**—In all complex and compound sentences, treat each main division of the sentence as a sentence by itself.

## V.

We can now see how many marks will be needed to indicate all these relations, external and internal.

*First*, to indicate the kinds of sentences, the stops enumerated in RULE I. will be more than enough. For the brackets and the dashes are alternatives of the parenthesis, and the double quotation-marks

virtually the same as the single signs of quotation. These marks may, therefore, be counted as six.

*Second*, to show the construction of our sentences, only two marks will be required,—each, however, in two forms:—

I. (1) The PERIOD, to separate complete sentences; and

II. (1) The COMMA, to separate modifiers from the words which they modify, and the parts of a compound construction from each other.

But the too constant use of the period gives rise (1) to a great many short sentences in passages in which important considerations forbid our adopting a broken style, and (2) to the complete isolation of clauses that are closely connected in thought. Hence,

I. (2) The COLON, or Short Period.

Again, in long sentences, the too constant use of the comma creates obscurity; and, even in short sentences, *the degree of relation in thought* between the members cannot always be accurately expressed with a single sign. Hence,

II. (2) The SEMI-COLON, or Long Comma.

From these principles we get

**RULE VII.**—The Period is used to separate complete declarative and imperative sentences.

**RULE VIII.**—The Colon, or Short Period, separates complete declarative and impera-

tive sentences which, though independent in grammatical construction, are closely connected in thought (1); or in which it is desired to preserve a flowing, as opposed to a broken, style (2). *E.g.*,

(1) I cannot tell thee, Harry, how lonely I felt in that place, amidst the scandal and squabbles: I regretted my prison almost. [Thackeray, *Virginians*, II. vii.]

(2) They had, however, he assured them, nothing to fear from him: he would keep their secret: he could not help wishing them success; but his conscience would not suffer him to take an active part in a rebellion. [Macaulay, *History of England*.]

COROLLARY.—The Colon is replaced by the period, even when the connection of thought is very close, if the writer intentionally adopts the broken style (1) and (2), or under the general rule of Sec. III. (3). *E.g.*,

(1) Look here, gentlemen! This is he. This is my brother, that was dead and is alive again! [Thackeray, *Virginians*, II. vii.]

(2) Imagine a well meaning laborious mechanic fondly attached to his wife and children. Bad times eome. He sees the wife whom he loves grow thinner and paler every day. His little ones cry for bread; and he has none to give them. Then come the professional agitators, the tempters, - - - . [Macaulay, *Speech on "The People's Charter"*.]

(3) The historian tells either what is false or what is true. In the former case he is no historian. In the latter, he has no opportunity for displaying his abilities.

NOTE.—The Period and the Colon have certain conventional uses:—

- (a) The Period, to mark an abbreviation.
- (b) The Colon, (or Colon and Single Dash,) to introduce enumerations and direct quotations.

[But see, also, Note 2 to RULE X.]

**RULE IX.**—The Comma separates from modified elements those modifiers which require separation (1), [RULE III. (2);] marks the parts of compound modifiers and elements (2); indicates inversions and important ellipses (3); and may even divide the several clauses of complex and compound sentences (4). *E.g.,*

- (1) Sentence (2), RULE III.
- (2) Sentences (3), (4), (5), (6) and (8), RULE III.
- (3) Examples under RULE III., Note.
- (4) Examples under RULES IV. and V.

NOTE.—The omission of connectives does not change the character of a true compound sentence; as may be seen by supplying the omitted words. *Thus,*

Love is sunshine, hate is shadow,  
Life is checkered shade and sunshine.

(*Cf.* Sentences (3) and (5) under RULE III.) But in the examples under RULE VIII. we have an entirely different construction.

**RULE X.**—The Semi-colon, or Long Comma, separates the members of a compound sentence, when they are less closely connected in thought but quite closely connected in construction (1); and this especially, if the members are themselves divided by commas (2). When the compound sentence consists of more than two members, and the connecting word is omitted except between the last two, the case is exactly analogous to (4) and (6) under RULE III. (3). *Thus,*

(1) Oxford was placed in the chair; and the King's overtures were taken into consideration.

(2) But Drayton's first publication, 'Harmony of the Church,' 1591, versified the highest poetry of the Old Testament, and loftily disclaimed - ; while the poetical name that he assumed was Rowland or Roland, the most heroic name in chivalry.

(3) His "Nymphidia" is a pretty burlesque of love, jealousy, combat, and reconciliation - ; his "Polyolbion," a miracle , contains ; one, at least, of his sonnets (that quoted in ) is - ; and his poem on the Battle of Agincourt is vivid, stirring,

**COROLLARY.**—The Comma may sometimes be used instead of the Semi-colon, if the clauses are very short. *Thus,*

It looks to an end, and it is the proper province of Ethics - .

 This liberty, however, (if, indeed, it be not a license,) should be used most sparingly.

NOTE 1.—The connectives may all be omitted in this case also, without changing the compound character of the sentence; and the mark required be the semi-colon, not the colon. [Cf. Note to RULE IX.] The distinction between the semi-colon and the comma is the same in this case as in those already instanced. *Thus,*

Never touch what is not your own; never take liberties with sacred things. [Sc. *and.*]

NOTE 2.—The Comma and the Semi-colon have also certain conventional uses:—

(a) The Comma, (or Comma and Single Dash,) to introduce a direct quotation.

(b) The Semi-colon, to introduce enumerations, examples, etc., that are preceded by ‘*as*,’ ‘*to wit*,’ ‘*viz.*,’ ‘*e. g.*,’ ‘*i. e.*,’ ‘*h. e.*,’ etc., when these stand as continuous parts of sentences. Otherwise, the period precedes. *E. g.,*

(a) And he said with a smile, “Our ship, I wis,  
Shall he of another form than this.”

(a) And he cried, with impulse strong,—  
“Helmsman! for the love of heaven,  
Teach me, too, that wondrous song!”

(b) To this class belong - verbs - signifying  
to quarrel with; as *μάχεσθαι τοῖς Θηλαιοῖς*.

(b) The dative of possession, after *εἰμι* - and similar  
verbs. *E. g.* *πολλαῖς μοι φίλοις εἰσίν.*

 In (b), most writers use a comma after the connective, on the principle of (a) of this NOTE. *E. g.,*

The inseparable preposition *re* or *red* is short; as, *rēmitto*.

But the difference of usage in this case is, of course, immaterial.

[The “etymological” points, (the Hyphen, Apostrophe, etc.,) are purposely left unnoticed, as they seem to belong to orthography, rather than to punctuation.]

## VI.

It would not be extravagant, perhaps, to expect from an analysis of this kind an absolute system of punctuation—a code of rules to which all pointing must conform. Based upon the essential doctrine of the sentence, and exemplified by actual cases from our best writers, these rules most certainly seem to promise absolute consistency and uniformity, provided only that their application be always guided by a correct judgment. But further consideration will show us why this cannot be. “Punctuation is one of the means of communication between a writer and his readers;” and it would be arrant presumption to attempt to decide for a competent writer what he intended to say. Besides, it would be far too much to expect that upon such points as underlie these rules, different minds should think alike. The relations of several thoughts to each other, and that of a single thought to its modifiers, may be conceived by several minds in as many ways; and punctuation will vary accordingly. To look no deeper,

analysis by *verbal* parsing is essentially different from that by *phrasal* parsing, and must give different results. Moreover, a question of punctuation is often a question of taste; and the tastes of men (it need not be said) admit of many degrees of cultivation. Let us exemplify these positions in a few simple cases.

(1) There is no one who can read the history of any of these heroes of the moral scene whose life has been one continued deed of generosity to mankind, without feeling that if there be virtue on earth, there has been virtue in that bosom which has suffered much or dared much that the world might be free from any of the ills which disgraced it.

Omitting details, we can see at once that the following variations are permissible. Indeed, it would, perhaps, be difficult to find a better example of allowable differences of punctuation.

(1<sup>a</sup>) There — scene, — mankind, — that, — earth,  
— <sup>(2)</sup> much, — it.

(1<sup>b</sup>) There — scene, — mankind, — feeling, that,  
— <sup>(1)</sup> earth, — <sup>(2)</sup> much, — much, — it.

(2) Already the orange riband had the double signification  
which, after the lapse of one hundred and sixty years, it still  
retains.

The commas are due to the inversion, (used in  
order to make 'retains' emphatic;) but, in so short  
a sentence, they might readily have been omitted.

In

(3) For when we were yet without strength, in due time,  
Christ died . . .

the punctuation is not amiss, if not absolutely necessary; but in

(4) This is done, more or less, by all the old Masters, without an exception.

the pointing would seem to be excessive.

(5) The words 'perhaps,' 'indeed,' 'accordingly,' *etc.* are generally commaëd off, because they stand for 'it may be,' 'to state the fact,' 'in accordance with this —,' *etc.* [See RULE IV. (b').]

Questions of taste are much more delicate and much more difficult to decide. By his pointing of the following, the author presents to the eye, as his words do to the mind, the deep, overpowering emotions that were controlling his hero:—

(1) Harry was greatly moved, too. He knelt down by her. He seized her cold hand, and kissed it. He told her, in his artless way, how very keenly he had felt her love for him. He bowed his comely head over her hand. She felt hot drops from his eyes raining on it. She had loved this boy.

In ordinary narrative his punctuation is different. *E.g.*,

(2) She lost; she won; she cheated; she pawned her jewels; who knows what else she was not ready to pawn, so as to find funds to supply her fury for play!

Again, compare with the last sentence of (2) the final clause of

(3) Look here, gentlemen! This is he. This is my brother, that was dead and is alive again! Can any man in Christendom produce such a brother as this?

Even as a question of taste, it seems doubtful

whether the ! should not have been used in (3), and the ? in (2).

## VII.

Such, then, is the *a priori* system of punctuation. That it is reasonable seems hardly to admit of doubt; for its *fundamenta* are essential truths of language. That it is practicable seems equally clear; for it finds ready exemplification in the usage of our best writers. The passages cited, however, are not given, as they are in the *a posteriori* codes, *in justification* of the rules: they are intended simply as examples, to illustrate the working of the rules. The rules themselves depend, as we have seen, upon principles of thought and construction. Still, the fact that our standard authors show by their usage that these principles have influenced their minds as they wrote, is a further proof of the value and correctness of the rules deducible from these principles; and this, too, although the same writers show quite as clearly by another and a widely different usage that these principles were not invariably their guides. For it would seem unquestionable that between a usage based upon the necessary conditions of the subject and one that contradicts these necessary conditions, there can be no choice: the former must be given the preference.

Further, a glance at the most prominent features

of the *a priori* system will show us still other reasons for preferring it. (1) It relates the semi-colon, *in value*, to the comma, not to the colon; and describes the colon as, in fact, a period, though shorter than the full stop. Contrast this view with the doctrine of the older systems:—

Period	= 1,
Colon	= $\frac{1}{2}$ ,
Semi-colon	= $\frac{1}{4}$ ,
Comma	= $\frac{1}{8}$ .

Then grant, for the sake of the argument, that this wondrous calculus is an exact statement of the relations of these stops. Is it not a more difficult conception of their relations? Does it not establish two relations each for the colon and the semi-colon, one up and one down? And what are its results? Simply, that uniformity of usage for these two stops has hitherto been impossible. The semi-colon first usurps the office of the colon, driving it almost out of use; and then makes bold to be even a period, reminding one of Dr. Franklin's sarcasm on the people of England just before the American Revolution,—“they have jostled themselves into the throne with the King.” To speak quite moderately, it certainly seems unfortunate that a stop which is often but little stronger than the comma, the least of all the stops, should be allowed to replace the period, the sign of the completed sentence. By the method here proposed

the colon and the semi-colon are kept entirely distinct, an allowable interchange taking place between stops of the same order, (the period and the colon or the comma and the semi-colon,) but never between stops of a different order. (2) The *a priori* system assigns as the leading principle in punctuation, not the degree of closeness of relation of the thoughts expressed, but the construction of the sentence. Both these principles, to be sure, are used in determining the rules given above ; but the former to only a trifling extent. The advantage in this lies in the fact that any pupil properly trained in English Grammar can grasp the distinctions between the constructions of the English language ; while questions as to the degree of relationship between several thoughts are difficult even for cultivated and disciplined minds. The *a priori* system must, therefore, excel in clearness and simplicity ; and so can hardly suffer by comparison with codes that rest upon puzzling and abstract distinctions, and lack clear fundamental truths to serve as guiding threads.

The hope may be ventured, therefore, that this essay has not been made in the wrong direction ; and that by the side of the way here pointed out, there may be erected, not the sign “No Thoroughfare,” but a finger-board inscribed “ To CONSISTENT AND UNIFORM PUNCTUATION.”

## APPENDIX.

### I. (Page 6.)

THE following examples illustrate the relations of Usage to its underlying principle of Good Sense.

(A) When usage is settled, a sufficient reason can always be given for it (1); although sometimes this reason only accounts for the usage, without convincing us of its propriety or its expediency (2). *Thus*, (1) the rule that requires the objective case after a transitive verb, rests upon a necessary law of thought; but (2) the spelling of 'number' with a 'b' and of 'sound' with a 'd,' while it can be accounted for, cannot be shown to be necessary.<sup>1</sup>

(B) When usage is unsettled, good sense becomes the arbiter, and would, in most cases, soon compel assent, if men were always able to be convinced by what is reasonable, and willing to be guided by it. *E.g.*, in that curious case of *attraction*, 'these kind of books,' Dean Alford appeals to usage. But, if usage were not divided, no person of education would ever be guilty of such a *sole-*

<sup>1</sup> Latin *numerus* and *sonus*. Our present pronunciation has followed upon the addition of the 'b' and 'd'. 'Numb' and 'limb' (A. S. *num* and *lim*) are correctly enunciated without the 'b', and 'clime' and 'climb' are distinguishable only by the eye. So, 'gown' has no 'd', except in provincial utterance.

*cism.* When, however, we see that the construction is due to a misconception of the agreement of the pronoun, and reflect that our language has never adopted attraction as a general principle of Grammar, the vice of the construction is at once evident.

(C) That usage is most easily unsettled which does not rest upon necessary truth. [A (2).] In this case, either of three results may follow:—(1) the usage may change; (2) it may become obsolete; or (3) two forms may grow up side by side in the language. *E. g.*, (1) the termination ‘—or’ has long contended with ‘—our’ in such words as ‘honor,’ ‘labor,’ *etc.* Chaucer wrote ‘—ure,’ and Shakspere ‘—our’; but before the middle of the eighteenth century, Latin influences had brought about a change. Dr. Johnson (1755) “restored the ancient usage” by replacing the ‘u’: Webster (1828) professed to do the same thing by leaving it out. The letter owed its place in the words only to the fact that they were all derived from a French form in ‘—eur;’ and it was certainly a fair question whether English should follow its French or its Latin predecessor. In the United States, the change may be said to have been accomplished, except for the one word ‘Saviour’: in England, usage is still unsettled. Oddly enough, we pronounce the ‘u’ (on-ur), while we write the ‘o’. [*Cf.* ‘neighbor’, from ‘neighbour’, and this from A. S. ‘nehgebur’.] (2) In Shakspere and other older writers we find the phrase ‘a many.’

Its strangeness wears off, when we reflect that English words change their “speech-part-ship” almost at will, [Earle’s *Philology*, Chap. iv.,] and that this usage, resting upon no unalterable law, has simply grown obsolete. (3) The oldest English knew no such construction as ‘It is I’, but only ‘It is ~~me~~’, in which ‘me’ is a dative case formed in imitation of the French ‘*c'est moi*.’ But the extended use of Latin by men who knew that language far better than they knew their vernacular, led to the formation of the idiom with the nominative; and this, although such a phrase as ‘*Est ego*’ had never been heard in Latin. The older idiom, however, did not die out, but held its place (and may still be said to hold its place) by the side of the new construction. For ‘It is I’, it is contended that our language no longer recognizes a dative case, and that predicates after ‘to be’ all take the nominative: for ‘It is me’, it is said that in all the languages most closely related to English, we find either ‘I am it’, (German ‘*Ich bin es*’,) or the dative after ‘It is’, (Danish ‘*det er mig*’;) while in Latin—whence our rule for the predicate-nominative—men wrote only ‘*Ego sum*’, (Greek *ἐγώ εἰμι*.)

## II. (Page 7.)

(1) An experienced compositor, appealed to on this subject, said that he could count on his finger-ends the times he had “set up” the colon in twenty-five years.

(2) On sixty-nine octavo-page lines I count eighteen periods, three question-marks, one parenthesis, one pair of dashes, one semi-colon, and one colon, *with eighty-five commas*. Yet the sentences are sometimes long and involved. In over four hundred lines, the colon is used but seven times, and the semi-colon but ten times.

### III. (Page 8.)

A few words may be added upon the nature and utility of punctuation-marks. The tests commonly offered, passages from which the points have been omitted, are sufficiently familiar, and need not be repeated here. A few considerations of a different character may, however, be presented.

*First*, the existence of the points is a *prima facie* proof of the necessity for them. Ancient MSS., indeed, were unpunctuated, except with the period; and the oldest printed books used no other point. But printing was not long invented, before the need of more points was felt, and the other stops followed:—the colon, about 1485; the comma, about 1521; the semi-colon, about 1570. In 1587, Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* was printed with these four marks and the ?, the \* and the (). The scarcity of books and the comparative fewness of readers of books among the ancients, together with the wide-spread ignorance of the later middle ages, explain how men “got on” so well without the points. But it could have been only measurably well. The men of the old world must have read

more slowly, and understood less readily than we. To be sure, the only possible test of this,—the omission of the points from a printed page,—is impracticable; for we are so accustomed to the present mode, that we cannot judge of the appearance an unpunctuated page presented to the ancient eye. But, from a parallel case, the “unpointed” Hebrew Bible, we should infer the impossibility of as rapid reading as we now find possible. It is true that Hebrew scholars acquire great facility in reading without the vowels; and it is confidently asserted that, while the language was spoken, the absence of the points made no difference; but it by no means necessarily follows that time was not (and is not) lost by the fashion.

*Secondly*, we may estimate the value of our points by another analogy. The railroad “block-station” is furnished with signals that may be read at a great distance by the engineer of an approaching train, in order that he may know in advance the state of the road. By their advice he stops, approaches cautiously, or shoots ahead at full speed without risk to life or property. The illustration would, perhaps, have been more pertinent, had it been taken from the permanent signs by the road-side which warn the “driver” of the curve or switch ahead, or bid him blow his whistle to give timely notice of his coming; but either figure will serve to make it clear that, just as travel was much less rapid in the days when the engineer had none of these helps, and

never approached a station except at a slackened speed, so modern readers would be much less able to “conquer the land” of books which they are invited to “go up and possess,” had they no points to catch the eye and indicate the sense as they read. Who would willingly go back to the days when the train ran “only in clear weather”?

*Thirdly*, if this be true, a modern reader, of the same capacity as an ancient, can accomplish a far greater amount of work. Consequently, a life-time is now just so much longer than in the days that are gone;—a blessing that, in this particular, at least, we owe to the stops. Hence, if a man in our century can read two books to every one that could be mastered by his intellectual equal in 1450, this thing that our stops have done for us should be told for a memorial of them. We might almost as well propose to return from our shapely, well-printed books to the written parchments of the past, as to accept any view of the art of punctuation that treats it as unimportant or unnecessary. By corollary, that system of punctuation is the worthiest which ensures to us the greatest consistency and uniformity in punctuating. For the best-punctuated books are the most easily read, and read in the largest numbers.







